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ILLOCUTIONARY SPEECH ACTS IN THE DEBATE BETWEEN

TRUMP AND BIDEN IN THE 2024 PRESIDENTIAL RACE

This study analyzes illocutionary speech acts in the 2024 U.S. presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, using Searle's Speech Act Theory and a qualitative descriptive approach. A total of 124 speech acts were examined from transcripts and video sources. Both candidates predominantly used assertive acts, Trump in 91% of his utterances and Biden in 74% to project credibility. Biden used more commissives (17%) than Trump (4%) to foster trust. Directive and expressive acts were minimal, and declaratives were absent. The findings reveal distinct rhetorical strategies, emphasizing how speech act patterns shape public perception and influence political communication.

Keywords: Speech act theory; Political rhetoric, U.S presidential debates; Illocutionary acts; Public perception

1. Introduction

Speech acts represent a core phenomenon in linguistics that reflects how speakers use language to perform actions rather than merely convey information. As stated by Astaman and Rido (2023), speakers do not simply deliver words but

aim to achieve specific communicative intentions through them. The effectiveness of speech acts depends on the context, speaker roles, and the linguistic forms used (Rosyidi et al. 2019). Particularly in political discourse, utterances often carry layered meanings, where the pragmatic intention may differ significantly from the literal content (Mufiah et al. 2018). Such complexity presents a risk of miscommunication when listeners fail to discern the speaker's underlying intent (Husain et al. 2020).

Political debates represent one of the most strategically significant forms of public discourse, offering candidates a structured platform to articulate contrasting views, defend their policies, and influence electoral behavior (Effendy et al. 2024). Beyond their informative role, debates serve as persuasive arenas where language becomes a deliberate tool for shaping public opinion and fostering political engagement. Through the lens of speech act theory particularly, illocutionary acts as defined by Searle (1969) and Austin (1962), these debates can be critically analyzed to uncover the intentions embedded in political utterances, such as asserting, promising, or directing.

The U.S. presidential debate, especially the 2024 contest between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, provides a compelling case for examining these dynamics. Given the global influence of the U.S. in geopolitical and ideological domains (Yulistiana 2022; Sartika 2021), the rhetorical strategies employed by both candidates were carefully constructed to bolster credibility, challenge opponents, and appeal to a diverse electorate, including undecided voters.

Despite the centrality of language in political debates, scholarly attention has largely focused on thematic content rather than the functional deployment of illocutionary acts. As noted by Schmidt et al. (2023) and Brugman et al. (2017), speech acts in high-stakes political contexts play a pivotal role in framing issues, guiding interpretation, and influencing electoral outcomes. The underrepresentation of this perspective signals a critical gap in political discourse research.

Understanding how illocutionary acts function within debates is essential, as these acts are not merely informative but performative while shaping a candidate's public persona, reinforcing authority, and managing interpersonal dynamics with both opponents and audiences. Misinterpretation of such acts may distort voter perceptions, thereby undermining the deliberative clarity and democratic integrity of political communication (Khodijah 2020; Searle 1969).

Moreover, there is a lack of comparative analysis between debaters, particularly regarding the types and functions of illocutionary acts they employ. This is especially notable in the 2024 U.S. presidential election, where Trump and Biden demonstrated markedly different rhetorical styles and communicative strategies. Without examining how each candidate strategically utilizes speech acts, scholars miss crucial elements of political messaging that shape voter decision-making and democratic engagement.

Furthermore, this study seeks to bridge the gap between traditional qualitative application of Speech Act Theory and emerging perspectives in contextual and computational pragmatics, offering a more comprehensive understanding of political communication between the two main high influence figures globally.

2. Literature review

2.1. Speech act theory and illocutionary acts

Austin (1962) introduced a tripartite framework of speech acts namely locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act involves the physical production of an utterance, while an illocutionary act reflects the speaker's intended function. It can be used in asserting, questioning or commanding. The perlocutionary act concerns the effect of the utterance on the listener, such as persuasion or inspiration. Austin's theory was foundational in reorienting linguistic inquiry toward the performative and social functions of language. Searle (1969, 1979) expanded on this model, categorizing illocutionary acts into five major types: Assertives (statements of belief or fact), Directives (requests or commands), Commissives (commitments to future actions), Expressives (expressions of psychological states) and Declarations (utterances that change reality). In political discourse, illocutionary acts particularly assertives and commissives are crucial for shaping audience perceptions. Van Dijk (1997) argued that political language serves as a vehicle for manipulating public opinion, with illocutionary strategies playing a central role in influencing belief, behavior, and emotional alignment.

2.2. Assertives in political discourse

Trump frequently employed assertive acts such as "stating" and "declaring" to assert dominance and control the public narrative (Nguyen 2022; Nurkhamidah 2020). However, the factual integrity of some statements has been questioned, raising concerns about credibility. In contrast, Biden's assertive strategies tend to be more cooperative and inclusive. Astaman and Rido (2023) observed that Biden blends factual assertions with collaborative promises to present an image of shared governance. Goodwin (2014) analyzed assertive acts as debate tools that impose argumentative obligations on opponents, aligning with Trump's confrontational debate style. Conversely, Biden's assertives are tempered by commissives, inviting consensus rather than confrontation. In the Indonesian context, Rosyidi et al. (2019) and Effendy (2024) found that assertive acts are often used as tools of reassurance rather than dominance. For example, President Jokowi employs assertives to soothe public concerns, reflecting cultural norms favoring harmony and indirectness.

2.3. Commissives in political rhetoric

Commissive acts commit the speaker to a future course of action. Biden, according to Simbolon (2023) and Sofian (2021), often uses promises related to healthcare, climate change, and economic recovery to foster unity and trust. In contrast, Trump's commissive acts, as noted by Ulum et al. (2018), are frequently delivered with confrontational or provocative undertones, often framing commitments as challenges rather than collaborative goals. Rakaj (2022) and Yulistiana (2022) highlighted that Biden, like Obama, prefers implicit commitments using modal verbs such as "will," generating emotional engagement without overt declarations. Trump, however, tends toward explicit and assertive commissives that emphasize personal authority. Cross-cultural comparisons offer further insight. Anyanwu (2023) found that Nigerian President Tinubu favors explicit commissive acts to meet immediate public demands. Meanwhile, Muhid (2024) observed that Indonesian politicians often adapt their promises in response to audience feedback, contrasting with Trump's fixed, unyielding style.

2.4. Cultural variation and perlocutionary impacts

Visser et al. (2019) analyzed audience reactions on Reddit to the 2016 U.S. presidential debates and noted that Trump's assertive-heavy rhetoric could alienate segments of the audience, whereas Biden's commissive-inclusive strategy tended to attract more positive engagement. In terms of speech accommodation, Muhid (2024) emphasized that Indonesian leaders frequently tailor their language based on audience response which is a practice absent in Trump's rhetorical style. Although Biden shows less adaptability, his use of relational commissives creates a more inclusive and flexible public persona than Trump's more rigid, dominant tone. Despite providing valuable insights, the reviewed studies present notable limitations. Most rely on qualitative methods, limiting objectivity and generalizability. While Astaman and Rido (2023) introduced quantitative analysis, similar empirical studies remain scarce, especially regarding the measurable impact of assertive and commissive acts in cross-cultural settings. Another limitation is the overemphasis on igh-profile speeches such as debates and victory addresses, which may not reflect politicians' rhetorical behavior in everyday or informal contexts. Expanding research to include town halls, interviews, and grassroots interactions could provide a more comprehensive picture.

2.5. Methodological approaches in political speech act analysis

Political discourse does not only concern the discourse structures but also the political contexts (Hisham and Hashim 2022). Conventional analysis of speech acts in politics has extremely relied on qualitative, manual coding methods, which enable for deep contextual interpretation (e.g. Astaman and Rido 2023; Effendy and Simatupang 2024). However, the field is growing on computational and corpus-based methods to handle larger datasets and enhance objectivity (Schmidt et al. 2023; Brugman et al. 2017). These different approaches, often employing transformer-based models and weak supervision, can identify pragmatic patterns at scale but may struggle with it, context-dependent nature of illocutionary force. This study adopts a rigorous qualitative descriptive approach, positioning itself to provide the detailed, context-sensitive analysis that is a prerequisite for validating and refining larger-scale computational studies. It thus addresses the call for methodological diversity and depth in pragmatic research (Félix-Brasdefer 2010).

The core principles of Pragmatics, which is the branch of linguistics that studies how context contributes to meaning, developed the theoretical foundation of this study. Pragmatics differ with syntax (sentence structure) or semantics (literal meaning), which concerned with what speakers do with language and their intentions as well as the effects of their utterances on listeners. Aligning with this, hence, Speech Act Theory, which is the specific pragmatic framework is employed in this study. As stated earlier, tripartite framework by Austin (1962) is utilized in this study. Profoundly, it can be beneficial in understanding how the foundational works have been shifted from Austin to Searle. Austin (1962) in *How to Do with Words* has challenged the view that language is solely for making true or false statements. He introduced the concept of performative utterances which sentences that do not just describe, on the contrary, it performs an action namely ("I name this ship…", "I promise…").

He then developed a tripartite model of speech acts such as locutionary act (the act of producing meaningful linguistic expression in literal meaning), illocutionary act (the intention underlying the utterance such as promising, warning, asserting, questioning - the core of the speech act) and perlocutionary act (the effect the utterance has on the listener such as persuading, frightening, inspiring). Searle (1969) systematized and advanced Austin's work by focusing predominantly on the illocutionary act and established a five-part taxonomy that has become the standard for such analysis. This study directly applies Searle's taxonomy namely the common ground of contested facts (the prevalence of assertives), the strategic divergence (the commissive divide), synthesis and interpretation (the underlying leadership personas).

While both main candidates in the 2024 U.S. presidential debate completely relied on assertive speech acts to control the factual narrative, their shifting use of

commissive acts reveals a fundamental strategic dichotomy which Trump utilized a rhetoric of retrospective assertion to project an image of unwavering authority, the way he criticized many people and politicians as well as oratorically (Hamza and Nordin 2024), whereas Biden embedded an anthropological pragmatics (Strukowska 2024) which employed rhetoric of prospective commitment to foster relational trust and outline a collaborative future.
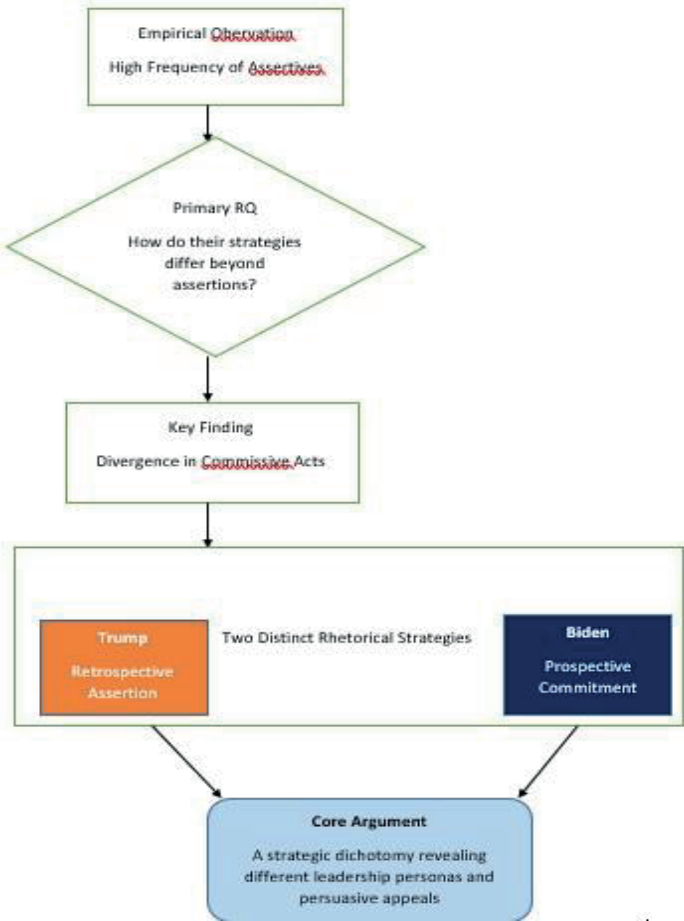

Figure 1: Argument logical steps

First and foremost, on the common ground of contested facts comprised a battle over truth claims. The data shows that both Trump (85.5%) and Biden (76.4%) mainly utilize assertive acts. This is not a sole stylistic choice, in contrast, a strategic necessity in a political arena where regulating the narrative is paramount. Assertions was used by both Trump and Biden to define their own

records positively (Trump: "We has the greatest economy"; Biden: "We created 15,000 new jobs."), attack their opponent's record negatively (Trump: "He has not done a good job."; Biden: "He didn't do much at all."). This shared dominance of assertive established the debate as a platform for constructing competing versions of reality.

However, the key to comprehending their different strategies lies not in the similarities, in contrast, in the critical distinction. The data reveals an obvious contrast in the use of commissive acts which Biden utilized over four times more frequently (14.5%) than Trump (3.6%). Their commissives, however, reflecting a narrow distinction which Biden's commissives are future direction-looking, specific on policy and targeted. They are promises aimed at building a collective future such as his utterance "We're going to make sure we cap rents," "We've got to make sure we provide for childcare costs". This strategy reflects the effort to build relational trust with specific voter groups and present a vision of proactive, empathetic governance. On the contrary, Trump's commissives are sparse and often framed as continuations of a past golden age or as defensive assurance as he uttered "Not going to drive them (taxes) higher". It seems they reinforce his central narrative that his previous term was the ideal and the next term would be a restoration, not a fresh plan.

This divergence in speech act selection generally constructs two contrasting leadership personas and persuasive appeals. It can be seen obviously in Trump's persona which the rhetoric, saturated with assertives and minimal future direction-looking commissives, projects a persona of absolute certainty and dominance. The argument implicit in his language is "The facts about my success are undeniable and my return is a foregone conclusion". This strategy obviously reinforces and establishes in-group solidarity among his supporters instead of promising a new policy vision. On the contrary, Biden's persona is more inclined to collaborative approach with his balanced use of assertives for defending his record and commissives for promising future action. This projects a persona of a pragmatic, reflecting a trustworthy leader. The argument is "Here is what I have done (assertive) and here is what I will do for you (commissive)". This strategy aims to build a broad background based on shared future interests and concrete policy goals.

Therefore, the paper argues that a quantitative and qualitative analysis of illocutionary acts does not solely categorize language, it decodes the very architecture of political persuasion. The patterns depicted particularly the assertive-commissive divergence which demonstrate that Trump and Biden were not only debating policies, on the other side, performing two different models of leadership namely rooted in the authoritative affirmation of a past ideal and the other in the promise of a collaboratively developed future. This linguistic evidence offers a rigorous, data-driven explanation for the intuitively different emotion of their communicative styles.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with documentary analysis to analyze the illocutionary speech acts in the 2024 Presidential Debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Unlike the quantitative research method focus on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative descriptive research aims to present a detailed and straightforward account of an event, described in accessible and precise terms. This approach is particularly appropriate for analyzing the intricate features of speech acts within a specific context, such as a political debate (Sandelowski 2000). Besides, the qualitative method allows for in-depth analysis of the linguistic features and contexts of utterances, while the descriptive approach enables systematic documentation and interpretation of speech patterns. Illocutionary speech acts are abstract and psychological in nature, which makes them difficult to analyze with statistical methods. Instead, they require detailed analysis and interpretation, making descriptive qualitative research the most suitable approach.

The secondary data is analyzed with Excel in this study, including transcriptions and video recordings of the 2024 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. All materials are obtained from reliable media outlets CNN, REV and BILIBILI. Rev is a well-known platform for transcription, captioning, and translation services, widely used by professionals, journalists, and content creators. CNN is one of the most recognized and authoritative news organizations globally. Known for timely reporting, it has access to professional journalists, global correspondents, and verified sources. Bilibili, a Chinese video-sharing platform, has become a major hub for user-generated and professional content, particularly in China. All of the above platforms are officially certified and recognized by the public, so the data obtained from these three platforms have a high degree of authority and credibility. To enhance the analysis, it is essential to compare transcript analysis with video recordings, as this allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the debate. The researcher is the only participant in this study.

3.2. Coding criteria and operational definitions

The utterances are categorized into illocutionary acts carried out employing a coding framework based on Searle's (1969) taxonomy. The main illocutionary force of each utterance was determined through a systematic analysis of its linguistics form, propositional content and the specific debate context. Selection criteria of each category with particular attention to Expressives attached with the operational definitions are outlined below:

Assertive: It can be understood as an act that commits the speaker to the truth of a proposition. It is a statement of fact, belief or opinion that can be judged as true or false. In terms of its linguistic cues, declarative sentence structure verbs namely "is", "are", "was", "did", "created" are phrases expressing factual claims. While for the contextual function, it is used to inform, to claim, to assert, to conclude or to describe. Based on the data of this study, for instance, "*We had the greatest economy in the history of our country*", Trump said. While Biden said, "*We created 15,000 new jobs*". Both present verifiable or falsifiable claims about economic performance.

Directive: It can be understood as an act that attempts to get the hearer to do something. It functions as a command, request or challenge. In terms of its linguistic cues, directive sentences looks like imperative verbs namely "look", "take", modal verbs of obligation "must", "should", and "have" to questions that function as demands. Based on the data of this study, for instance, "You have to take a look at what I was left when I became president…", Biden said. This is a directive because it pushes the audience to perform a cognitive action (to "look" and acknowledge his starting point).

Commissive: It can be understood as an act that commits the speaker to some future course of action. It expresses an intention. In terms of its linguistic cues, commissive reflects first-person pronouns with future-oriented verbs namely "I will", "We will", "We are going to", "I promise" which all phrases required to a commitment. While for the contextual function, it is used to promise, to pledge, to vow, to guarantee or to threaten. Based on the data of this study, for instance, "We are going to make sure cap rents…" Biden said. This sentence commits the speaker to a future policy action.

Expressive: It can be understood as an act that expresses the speaker's psychological state or attitude about a state of affairs. The focus is on the internal emotional or evaluative reaction of the speaker. In terms of its linguistic cues, expressive reflects words or phrases that convey emotion, judgement, appreciation or greeting namely "thank", "congratulate", "apologize", "deplore", "terrible", "great", and "perfect". While for the contextual function, it is used to thank, to apologize, to congratulate, to complain, to praise, to blame, or express pleasure or displeasure. While the key clarification for categorization is the crucial test for an Expressive was that the utterance's primary function was not to make a factual claim (Assertive) or a promise (Commissive). Instead of that, it is used to evaluate a situation emotionally or morally. Based on the data of this study, "It was terrible", said Biden. This is not primarily a factual claim about an event (though it implies one), but an evaluation and expression of a negative psychological state towards that event. While Trump said, "It was perfect" reflects an expression of a positive appraisal instead of a verifiable fact. It functions to convey his attitude of supreme satisfaction. Then Biden said, "It'd be all right" which this was coded as a Commissive because it functions as

a reassuring promise about a future state, not solely an expression of a current feeling.

Declarative: It can be understood as an act that brings about a change in institutional reality simply by being successfully uttered. These require specific institutional authority of the speaker. In terms of its linguistic cues, performative verbs in a specific context such as "I declare", "I pronounce" and "I resign". Hence, the contextual function is to declare war, to appoint, to resign or to sentence. From the perspective of explanation of absence, no declaratives were found as the candidate not have the solitary institutional authority within the debate context to perform such acts.

3.3. Data collection procedure

The primary data consisted of the official debate transcript sourced from CNN. The keywords searched are "2024 America Presidential Debate Transcript" and "Trump Biden debate full text" Meanwhile, the video recordings with subtitles from Rev and Bilibili were downloaded through (First 2024 Presidential Debate on CNN (rev.com)). The transcript was verified against video recordings from REV and Bilibili in ensuring the accuracy. These platforms were selected for their credibility and widespread use in journals and academic contexts. The entire debate was initially reviewed. It provides a structured, detailed, and accurate record of the candidates' spoken words, and it reflects a high-stakes communicative context, making it ideal for analyzing intentional and strategic use of illocutionary acts. Besides, it ensures ethical compliance as it is freely accessible and devoid of confidentiality concerns.

3.4. Data analysis

The data (subtitles) were initially compared with speech in the obtained transcripts and videos, correct or errors in the transcriptions. After ensuring the accuracy of the text of the debate, parts of transcription that are suitable were selected as data for this study. The selection follows these criteria:

3.4.1. Relevance to illocutionary speech acts

Segments must demonstrate clear use of speech acts as per Searle's Speech Act Theory, such as assertives (claims or statements), directives (requests or commands), commissives (promises or commitments), expressives (emotions or attitudes), and declaratives (performative acts).

3.4.2. Interactive and argumentative contexts

Exchanges where candidates directly address each other's arguments or rebut points are prioritized, as these are likely to involve complex illocutionary acts that serve persuasive and defensive purposes.

3.4.3. Significance of topics discussed

Segments addressing major themes or topics central to the debate are selected, as these provide meaningful contexts for analyzing how illocutionary acts are employed to influence voter perception.

3.4.4. Clarity and completeness

Selected parts must be coherent and self-contained to ensure accurate interpretation of the speech acts within the context of the exchange.

3.4.5. Balance between speakers

Equal representation of both candidates is maintained to enable comparative analysis of their speech act strategies.

3.4.6. Impactful and high-stakes moments

Key moments in the debate where candidates deliver impactful statements, address critical issues, or respond to contentious challenges are included. The primary objective of this study is to identify and analyze the illocutionary intentions of the candidates in the 2024 presidential debate, using Searle's Speech Act Theory as the theoretical framework. The analysis focuses on segments that contain explicit speech acts, such as assertions (e.g., claims about policies), directives (e.g., calls to action), and expressives (e.g., emotional appeals), as these directly reflect the pragmatic functions of language. By selecting these sections, the study ensures that the data aligns closely with its linguistic focus, as clear examples of speech acts are essential for valid and reliable pragmatic analysis (Félix-Brasdefer, 2010).

Interactive segments, which reveal not only illocutionary functions but also the perlocutionary effects (the responses elicited from the audience), are particularly valuable. According to González-Lloret (2010), sequential exchanges in dialogue provide insight into the speakers' linguistic intentions and the pragmatic dynamics of the interaction. Furthermore, clarity and full contextual understanding are essential in speech act analysis, as emphasized by González-Lloret (2010), to ensure accurate interpretation of the communicative acts.

Equally important is the need for equal representation of both candidates in the analysis. This balance ensures that the study remains unbiased and reflective

of each candidate's communicative strategies. Neglecting one participant would undermine the comparative nature of the research. Political discourse analysis, as noted by Smith (2014), frequently emphasizes the importance of balance to avoid skewed interpretations.

Finally, selecting key moments, such as exchanges on controversial topics, ensures that the analysis captures critical communicative intentions. These moments are often densely packed with illocutionary acts aimed at persuasion and influence. As Morales-Ramirez et al. (2019) argue, focusing on these critical utterances in strategic communication settings is essential for understanding the full scope of illocutionary acts used in political discourse.

These transcripts were segmented into manageable portions based on thematic relevance and interaction dynamics. Besides, all texts are annotated following The Jefferson Transcription System, Jefferson Transcription System is a detailed and standardized method of transcribing spoken interactions, developed by sociologist and conversation analyst Gail Jefferson. It is widely used in conversation analysis (CA) to capture not only the words spoken but also the nuances of how they are spoken, including timing, intonation, pauses, and overlapping speech.

3.4.7. Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality

Since the research involves public figures engaging in a televised debate, issues of anonymity and confidentiality were not applicable. However, ethical considerations were maintained by using publicly available data and avoiding misrepresentation or out-of-context interpretation of the candidates' statements. Citations and sources were meticulously documented to uphold academic integrity.

3.4.8. Data coding approach

The data coding process was guided by Searle's Speech Act Theory, focusing on identifying the illocutionary force of the candidates' utterances. The following steps were undertaken:

1. Preliminary Reading; a thorough review of the transcripts was conducted to familiarize with the data.
2. Unitization; The transcripts were divided into analyzable units, typically sentences or short paragraphs that encapsulated a complete illocutionary act.
3. Coding Framework; A coding framework was developed based on the five categories of speech acts: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives.
4. Manual Coding; Each unit was manually coded by assigning it to one or more categories based on its illocutionary intent. For instance, a statement

like "I will create jobs" was coded as a commissive, while "Your policies are disastrous" was categorized as an assertive.

5. Inter-Coder Reliability; To ensure accuracy, the coding process was reviewed by a second linguistics scholar to cross-check the assignments. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion to reach a consensus.

6. Thematic Analysis; The coded data were analyzed thematically to uncover patterns in the use of speech acts by each candidate. Particular attention was given to the context and pragmatic implications of their statements.

Finally, the researcher has segmentized the transcript into individual utterances and analyze Biden's and Trump's speeches following Searle's speech acts theoretical criteria.

4. Results and findings

This section presents the analysis of the selected data from the presidential election debate. The researcher categorized the speech into 110 distinct speech acts, each of which is analyzed according to the five categories of speech acts. A detailed qualitative analysis of these 110 utterances is provided in this section, as outlined below:

Table 1: Utterances between Trump and Biden

No.	Speaker	Utterance	Speech Act Type
1	Biden	*You have to take a look at what I was left when I became president...*	Directive
2	Biden	*We had an economy that was in free-fall.*	Assertive
3	Biden	*The pandemic was so badly handled, many people were dying.*	Assertive
4	Biden	*All he said was, it's not that serious.*	Assertive
5	Biden	*Just inject a little bleach in your arm.*	Directive
6	Biden	*It'd be all right.*	Commissive
7	Biden	*The economy collapsed.*	Assertive
8	Biden	*There were no jobs.*	Assertive
9	Biden	*Unemployment rate rose to 15 percent.*	Assertive
10	Biden	*It was terrible.*	Expressive
11	Biden	*...try to put things back together again.*	Assertive
12	Biden	*That's exactly what we began to do.*	Assertive
13	Biden	*We created 15,000 new jobs.*	Assertive

Table 1. cont.

No.	Speaker	Utterance	Speech Act Type
14	Biden	*800,000 new manufacturing jobs.*	Assertive
15	Biden	*But there's more to be done.*	Assertive
16	Biden	*There's more to be done.*	Assertive
17	Biden	*Working class people are still in trouble.*	Assertive
18	Biden	*I come from Scranton, Pennsylvania.*	Assertive
19	Biden	*...the kitchen table... was a problem.*	Expressive
20	Biden	*Price of eggs... housing, etc.*	Assertive
21	Biden	*We're going to make sure we deal with those problems.*	Commissive
22	Biden	*We're going to make sure we build 2 million new units.*	Commissive
23	Biden	*We're going to make sure we cap rents...*	Commissive
24	Biden	*...corporate greed are the reason...*	Assertive
25	Biden	*...he didn't do much at all.*	Assertive
26	Biden	*By the time he left, there's – things had been in chaos.*	Assertive
27	Biden	*There was literally chaos.*	Assertive
28	Biden	*We put things back together.*	Assertive
29	Biden	*We created, as I said, those jobs.*	Assertive
30	Biden	*...$15 insulin shot...*	Assertive / Expressive
31	Biden	*No senior has to pay more than $200...*	Commissive
32	Biden	*We're going to make that available to everybody...*	Commissive
33	Biden	*We're working to bring down prices...*	Commissive
34	Trump	*We had the greatest economy in the history of our country.*	Assertive
35	Trump	*We had never done so well.*	Assertive
36	Trump	*Everybody was amazed by it.*	Expressive
37	Trump	*Other countries were copying us.*	Assertive
38	Trump	*We got hit with COVID.*	Assertive
39	Trump	*We spent the money necessary...*	Assertive
40	Trump	*We did a great job.*	Expressive
41	Trump	*We got a lot of credit for the economy...*	Assertive

Table 1. cont.

No.	Speaker	Utterance	Speech Act Type
42	Trump	*Everything was rocking good.*	Expressive
43	Trump	*We should have gotten credit for COVID...*	Assertive
44	Trump	*He created mandates...*	Assertive
45	Trump	*Stock market was higher than pre-COVID...*	Assertive
46	Trump	*Only jobs he created are for illegal immigrants...*	Assertive
47	Trump	*He has not done a good job.*	Assertive
48	Trump	*He's done a poor job.*	Assertive
49	Trump	*Inflation's killing our country.*	Assertive
50	Trump	*It is absolutely killing us.*	Assertive
51	Biden	*Well, look, the greatest economy in the world, he's the only one who thinks that, I think.*	Assertive
52	Biden	*I don't know anybody else who thinks it was great – he had the greatest economy in the world.*	Assertive
53	Biden	*And, you know, the fact of the matter is that we found ourselves in a situation where his economy – he rewarded the wealthy.*	Assertive
54	Biden	*He had the largest tax cut in American history, $2 trillion.*	Assertive
55	Biden	*He raised the deficit larger than any president has in any one term.*	Assertive
56	Biden	*He's the only president other than Herbert Hoover who has lost more jobs than he had when he began, since Herbert Hoover.*	Assertive
57	Biden	*The idea that he did something that was significant.*	Assertive
58	Biden	*And the military – you know, when he was president, they were still killing people in Afghanistan.*	Assertive
59	Biden	*He didn't do anything about that.*	Assertive
60	Biden	*When he was president, we still found ourselves in a position where you had a notion that we were this safe country.*	Assertive
61	Biden	*The truth is, I'm the only president this century that doesn't have any – this decade – doesn't have any troops dying anywhere in the world, like he did.*	Assertive
62	Trump	*Am I allowed to respond to him?*	Directive
63	Trump	*Not going to drive them higher.*	Commissive

Table 1. cont.

No.	Speaker	Utterance	Speech Act Type
64	Trump	*It's just going to cause countries that have been ripping us off for years... to pay us a lot of money...*	Commissive
65	Trump	*But he – he made a statement.*	Assertive
66	Trump	*The only thing he was right about is I gave you the largest tax cut in history.*	Assertive
67	Trump	*I also gave you the largest regulation cut in history.*	Assertive
68	Trump	*That's why we had all the jobs.*	Assertive
69	Trump	*And the jobs went down and then they bounced back and he's taking credit for bounce-back jobs.*	Assertive
70	Trump	*You can't do that.*	Directive
71	Trump	*He also said he inherited 9 percent inflation.*	Assertive
72	Trump	*No, he inherited almost no inflation and it stayed that way for 14 months.*	Assertive
73	Trump	*And then it blew up under his leadership...*	Assertive
74	Trump	*And they don't know what they were doing.*	Assertive
75	Trump	*It was the worst – probably the worst administration in history.*	Assertive
76	Trump	*There's never been.*	Assertive
77	Biden	*They acknowledge he made a lot of progress, number one.*	Assertive
78	Biden	*The facts of the matter are more small black businesses that have been started in any time in history.*	Assertive
79	Biden	*Number two, the wages of black – black unemployment is the lowest level it has been in a long, long time.*	Assertive
80	Biden	*...trying to provide housing for black Americans and dealing with segregation...*	Assertive
81	Biden	*The choice that black families have to make relative to childcare is incredibly difficult.*	Assertive
82	Biden	*I was able to reduce black childcare costs.*	Assertive
83	Biden	*I cut them in half, in half.*	Assertive
84	Biden	*We've got to make sure we provide for childcare costs.*	Commissive
85	Biden	*We've got to make sure... you increase economic growth...*	Commissive

Table 1. cont.

No.	Speaker	Utterance	Speech Act Type
86	Biden	*Considerably more to be done... but we've done a great deal so far...*	Assertive
87	Biden	*I say, I don't blame them for being disappointed.*	Assertive
88	Biden	*Inflation is still hurting them badly.*	Assertive
89	Biden	*Any black family, first time home buyer should get a $10,000 tax credit...*	Assertive
90	Biden	*I made sure... student loans... forgiven after 10 years.*	Assertive
91	Biden	*Millions have benefited from that and we're going to do a whole lot more...*	Commissive
92	Trump	*And he caused the inflation.*	Assertive
93	Trump	*He's blaming inflation.*	Assertive
94	Trump	*And he's right, it's been very bad.*	Assertive
95	Trump	*It's killing black families and Hispanic families...*	Assertive
96	Trump	*It's killing people.*	Assertive
97	Trump	*They can't buy groceries anymore. They can't.*	Assertive
98	Trump	*You look at the cost of food where it's doubled and tripled and quadrupled.*	Directive
99	Trump	*They're not living anymore.*	Assertive
100	Trump	*He caused this inflation.*	Assertive
101	Trump	*I gave him a country with no, essentially no inflation.*	Assertive
102	Trump	*It was perfect.*	Assertive
103	Trump	*It was so good.*	Assertive
104	Trump	*All he had to do is leave it alone.*	Assertive
105	Trump	*He destroyed it with his green new scam...*	Assertive
106	Trump	*He caused inflation.*	Assertive
107	Trump	*The fact is that his big kill on the black people is the millions...*	Assertive
108	Trump	*They're taking black jobs now and it could be 18.*	Assertive
109	Trump	*It could be 19 and even 20 million people.*	Assertive
110	Trump	*You're going to see something that's going to be the worst in our history.*	Assertive

Table 2: Illocutionary speech acts in Trump and Biden's speech

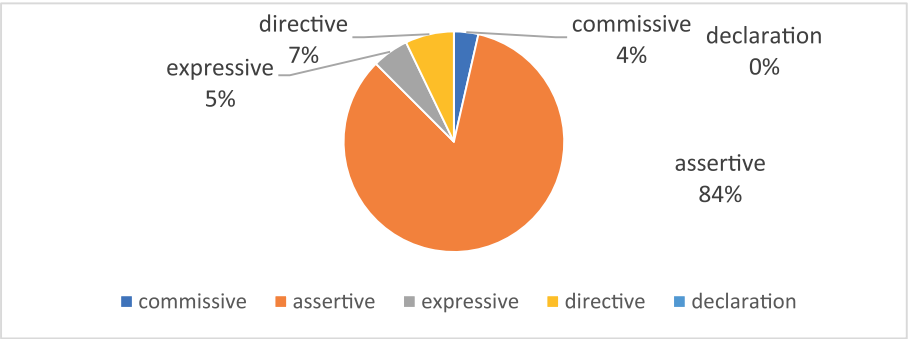|	Types of illocutionary speech acts	Trump's speech	Biden's speech
1	Assertive	47	53
2	Expressive	3	4
3	Directive	4	2
4	Commissive	2	10
5	Declaration	0	0

Figure 1: Illocutionary speech acts used by Trump in 2024 presidential debate
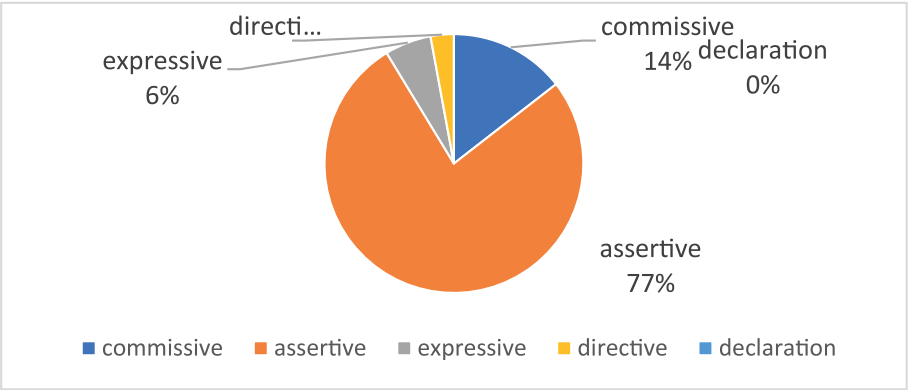

Figure 2: Illocutionary speech acts used by Biden in 2024 presidential debate

The analysis of illocutionary speech acts in the 2024 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden highlights significant differences in their rhetorical strategies, which align with existing research on political discourse. Both candidates relied heavily on assertive speech acts, with Trump using them in 84% and Biden in 77% of their statements. This dominance of assertives, as

supported by studies such as Nguyen (2022) and Goodwin (2014), reflects the candidates' focus on asserting facts, framing policies, and shaping public narratives. Trump's assertive-heavy approach aligns with his rhetorical style of presenting his statements as indisputable truths to establish dominance and deter opposition, as noted by Nurkhamidah (2020) and Goodwin (2014). Similarly, Biden's assertives, though less frequent than Trump's, reveal his strategic use of facts to assert credibility and focus on collaborative solutions, consistent with findings from Sofian (2021) and Simbolon (2023).

Commissive speech acts, which involve commitments or promises, were used significantly more by Biden (14%) than Trump (4%). This suggests Biden's strategy emphasized building relational trust and offering a vision of collective progress, as reflected in previous studies by Rakaj (2022) and Astaman & Rido (2023). In contrast, Trump's commissive acts, which were fewer in number, often carried a confrontational tone, focusing on self-assured promises to solidify his authority. This distinction aligns with research by Ulum et al. (2018), which noted the provocational use of commissive acts in Trump's discourse, contrasting with Biden's more inclusive and cooperative approach.

Expressive speech acts, conveying emotions or attitudes, accounted for 5% of Trump's and 6% of Biden's speech acts. Both candidates employed them sparingly, indicating limited reliance on emotional appeals to connect with the audience. However, Biden's slightly higher use of expressives reflects his intent to build emotional resonance with the audience, consistent with the findings of Simbolon (2023) on Biden's empathetic approach in public discourse.

Directive speech acts, including commands or requests, showed a notable contrast, with Trump using them at 7% and Biden at 3%. Trump's higher use of directives aligns with his assertive and commanding style, which aims to mobilize or persuade the audience through direct calls to action, as highlighted by Nguyen (2022). Biden's lower frequency of directives indicates a rhetorical strategy that prioritizes persuasion through assertives and commissives rather than direct instructions.

Declarative speech acts, which create immediate changes in reality, were entirely absent in the debate for both candidates. This reflects the debate's context, where declaratives are less relevant, as supported by previous research on political discourse (Effendy & Simatupang, 2024).

In summary, the findings align with previous studies on the rhetorical styles of Trump and Biden. Trump's assertive-dominant and directive-heavy discourse reflects a confrontational and authoritative style, while Biden's more balanced use of assertives and commissives emphasizes his collaborative and relational approach. These patterns demonstrate how both candidates employed speech acts strategically to influence voter perceptions and align their rhetoric with their broader political narratives.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize the critical role of illocutionary speech acts in shaping political discourse and influencing public perceptions during the 2024 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Both candidates relied heavily on assertive speech acts, highlighting their shared objective of asserting facts, framing narratives, and projecting authority. This dominance of assertives reflects a well-documented strategy in political communication, where candidates use factual statements to establish credibility and control the narrative, a tactic supported by previous research. Biden's higher use of commissive speech acts, compared to Trump, demonstrates his focus on building relational trust and fostering inclusivity by making promises that appeal to collective societal needs. In contrast, Trump's commissives, though less frequent, reinforced his authoritative persona through assertive commitments.

The limited use of expressive and directive speech acts further underscores the candidates' primary focus on rational arguments rather than emotional appeals or explicit instructions. Trump's slightly greater reliance on directives suggests a preference for mobilizing and instructing his audience, while Biden's restrained use of directives indicates a focus on persuasion through logical and collaborative means. The absence of declarative speech acts reflects the debate's context, where candidates aim to influence perceptions rather than create immediate formal changes. Overall, these findings reinforce the strategic use of illocutionary acts as a key mechanism for candidates to navigate high-stakes political discourse and achieve their rhetorical objectives.

The results of this study hold important implications for understanding political communication and voter behavior. The strategic use of illocutionary speech acts illustrates how candidates adapt their rhetorical approaches to align with their political goals and audience expectations. Trump's assertive-dominant and directive-heavy style reflects a confrontational approach designed to establish authority and control the debate, whereas Biden's balanced use of assertives and commissives underscores a leadership style centered on trust, inclusivity, and collective problem-solving. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how linguistic choices shape public opinion, offering valuable insights for political strategists and communication specialists.

Moreover, this study highlights the broader importance of illocutionary speech act analysis in evaluating political discourse. By examining the ways candidates use language to perform actions such as asserting facts, making promises, or issuing directives, this research provides a framework for analyzing the pragmatic dimensions of political rhetoric. Such insights are not only valuable for academics but also for voters and media analysts, helping to foster a more informed and critical electorate. The findings underscore the need for voters to develop the ability to interpret political language critically, reducing the

risk of misinterpretation and enhancing democratic engagement. Future research should expand on these findings by exploring illocutionary acts across different political contexts, including debates in diverse cultural and electoral systems, to further investigate the relationship between language, leadership style, and voter influence.

Despite Searle's (1969) taxonomy of speech acts remains a foundational and powerful tool for pragmatic analysis, recent scientific developments in linguistics and discourse analysis demand a more comprehensive and fresh approach. This study shifts beyond a purely classificatory application of Speech Act Theory by integrating two key contemporary perspectives namely Contextual Pragmatics and the potential of Computational Pragmatics. This integrated framework offers a fresher, more robust lens for analyzing in the context of political debate.

Classic speech act theory can sometimes treat utterances as isolated units. However, contemporary pragmatics, particularly work based on Verschueren's (1999) Theory of Adaptability and Cap's (2013) Proximization Theory, emphasizes that meaning is dynamically co-constructed within a specific context. As for this study, context involves three main levels namely the immediate debate context, the socio-political context and the cultural context of American political discourse.

While the immediate debate context refers to speech acts are not delivered in a vacuum. Instead of that, speech acts are part of a sequential, turn-taking argument. An assertive made by Biden such as "The economy collapsed" is not just a statement of fact, it is a counter-assertive designed to refute Trump's prior claim of a "great economy". This indicates a perspective in which speech acts are reframed as moves in a strategic game where their function is used by the previous move and anticipates the next. The second main layer was the socio-political context in which the illocutionary force of an act is deeply tied to the broader political narrative. When Trump employs a directive such as "You have to take a look at what I was left", he is not solely asking for observation, yet, he is invoking a shared narrative among his base about a 'stolen election' and a 'ruined country', making the act a rallying cry. Similarly, Biden's commissive on childcare are not sole promises as they are acts of ideological alignment with progressive values, reinforcing his campaign's narrative of empathy and support for families.

The high frequency of assertives can be understood through the lens of 'post-truth' communication (Keyes, 2004). In the context where factual consensus is declined, the strategic goal shifts from establishing a shared truth to asserting in-group loyalty. The perlocutionary goal of Trump's prolific assertives may not be universal belief, its rather than the reinforcement of his base's identity against a perceived 'liberal elite'.

A vast advancement in the field is the growth of Computational Pragmatics which employs natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning to

analyse speech acts at scale (Schmidt et al., 2023). Computational pragmatics caters rich in qualitative insights for extensive analysis. It relies on the on-board orientation system, which is part of the agent's interface component and monitors moment by moment as a result of location, time, speaker and hearer (Hausser, 2023). While this study employs a rigorous qualitative methodology, framing it within this new paradigm strengthens its contribution.

From the perspective of computational pragmatics, this study offers a necessary foundation for future computational research. Future computational pragmatics is context-sensitive coding that provides the 'ground truth' that computational models strive to achieve. As stated by Schmidt et al. (2023), a significant challenge in computational speech act classification is the need for large, accurately labeled datasets. This study fine-grained analysis of 110 utterances serves as a valuable and validated micro-datasets that could be employed to train or refine computational models for political discourse. Besides, computational pragmatics is able to address the gap obviously by identifying patterns in large corpora, for instance, all campaign speeches by a candidate (Brugman et al., 2017). In the context of Trump's utterance, for instance, he said "It was perfect" as an expressive is straightforward for a human coder who can assess its sarcastic or emphatic tone, but it is a significant challenge for an algorithm. Hence, this study highlights the continued necessity of deep qualitative analysis to capture the subtleties that pure automation misses.

In conclusion, the findings of this study create a hypothesis for large-scale testing which is a key divergence that identified namely Trump's assertive-heavy vs Biden's commissive-balanced profile. This kind of study could be carried out by a computational study to test this hypothesis across much larger datasets. This insight positions this study as a foundational step that bridges classic theory and big-data analysis.

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